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SOCIO-SPATIAL APPROACHES TO LITERACY STUDIES

Rethinking the social constitution and politics of space

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> I have become convinced that the implicit assumptions we make about space are important, and that, maybe, it could be productive to think about space differently.
>
> *(Massey 2005: 1)*

Introduction

Attention to space and the spatiality of literacy practice is increasingly inspiring new ways of analysing literacy research, and in particular, research that describes and traces flows, networks, and connections between literacy practices within and across specific social spaces, such as school and home (Bulfin and North 2007; Nespor 1997, 2008; Pahl 2001), the library (Nixon 2003), the mall (Moje 2004), after-school contexts (Brass 2008), prisons (Wilson 2004), and virtual environments (Valk 2008). The reassertion of space in literacy studies has been referred to as the 'spatial turn', and can be seen as complementary and parallel to other shifts in literacy research, including the social (e.g. Gee 1992; Street 1995), the critical (e.g. Comber and Simpson 2001; Luke 1998), and the digital turn (Mills 2010b). The concept of 'space' in this chapter is not simply a response to the "now-fashionable attachment" of theorists "to geographical facts and spatial metaphors" (Soja 2004: ix). Rather, the first principle of socio-spatial literacy studies is that language practices are distributed socio-geographically, appearing in distinct forms in certain social sites, having both similarities and distinctions to literacy practices in other social spaces. At the same time spaces such as classrooms are not considered as mere containers in which literacy practices occur. Rather, spatiality in literacy studies includes the socio-material effects and relations of space-time in relation to literacy practices, including the temporal dimension of flows or connections between literacy practices, textual artefacts, technologies for textual production, locations of literacy practices and texts, networks, social actors, and communities of practice.

A second key proposition of spatial approaches to literacy is the understanding that space and literacy practices are socially produced, as are the organisation and meaning of spaces. This view

the onset of a book-reading session. The teacher monitors the correct posture, movement, and the direction of students' gaze, both implicitly and overtly, and power is used to maintain the social order. This work demonstrated and theorised how the material culture of classroom reading lessons involves bodily inscriptions, and the moral regulation of the literate subject within the social space. Literate practices in schools are realised spatially, materially, and are governed by diffuse forms of disciplinary power.

Space as dynamic and fluid: More than determinist accounts of space

The historical and dynamic nature of space has also taken centre stage in socio-spatial theory (Massey 2005). Spaces can be seen as contingent and negotiated, constituted by the multiplicity of trajectories that bring people together at a specific time and place. British social geographer, Doreen Massey, is considered a key contributor to a feminist framing of space, including a consciousness of the gendered ordering of space and the power-geometrics of the ordering of gender inequality (Fenwick *et al.* 2011: 131). In Massey's (1993: 155) view space and time cannot be separated: "Space is not static (i.e. timeless), nor time spaceless" She argues that: "Conceptualising space as open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming, is a prerequisite for history to be open, and thus a prerequisite, too, for the possibility of politics" (Massey 2005: 59), where space becomes an arena of possibility for creating something new. It is this productive potential of geographical metaphors for journeying and meeting that has recently attracted literacy researchers. These understandings of space as formed by a multiplicity of trajectories has led to re-examining adolescents' reading histories in the work of Cliff-Hodges (2010). A class of twelve- to thirteen-year-old students were invited to represent their reading histories in a collage entitled 'Rivers of Reading'. The analysis pointed to the ways in which young people's trajectories as readers are constructed in relation to other people and across time and places. Comber (2013) also considers the affordances of Massey's work for reimagining the classroom as a meeting-place – a site for collaborative meaning making – whereby students' placed histories and current engagements with the relational politics of everyday places become the objects of study.

Similarly, in a comprehensive review of research entitled "The changing social spaces of learning: Mapping new mobilities", Leander and colleagues (2010) argue that thinking about the classroom from a nexus-like perspective, where its permeability and connectedness is emphasised, rather than from the usual container-like perspective enable us to think differently about learning. Using Massey's (2005: 9) approach to a space as "the simultaneity of stories-so-far", they revisit Heath's (1983) seminal study, *Ways with Words,* to consider what might be missing from her 'localist' portrayal of the Roadville and Trackton communities. While they do acknowledge some permeability and mobility in Heath's account they argue that her work may have come to stand for the idea of "containing culture in the local" (p. 334) and to have paved the way for other locally bounded studies of situated literacy learning. Their preference is for a more mobile, relational analysis. However as we discuss below it may be less what Heath portrayed and more a case of what scholars of the time were ready for that meant that the contrastive renditions of the linguistic practices of the three communities were rendered in more static ways than were ever intended by Heath herself. In addition, the spatial theories of that time did not have the explanatory power to account for the escalation of population mobility that was to come and which was to have impact on the local in profound ways as Heath's later work demonstrates (Heath 2012).

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